



PUPPET WIZARDRY

Atlanta's Center for Puppetry Arts Captivates Adults and Kids Alike



This place has more weird creatures than the zoo. Except these characters come in fancy costumes, wild hair and loud colors. On the outside, the building looks like the elementary school it once housed, but inside there are signs of inventiveness run rampant. It's a beehive of creativity, particularly in

the Center's workshops, where mock-ups of stage sets sit alongside alternate life forms, faceless creatures, cardboard cut-outs and odd ambulatory contraptions.

Jim Henson, the creator of *Sesame Street* and the Muppets, brought the ancient art form of puppetry to the world's attention in the '60s and '70s. If he were alive today and saw all this, he'd be grinning from ear to ear. His legacy is well-established here at the Center for Puppetry Arts in Atlanta, now celebrating its 25th year. "Actually being able to survive for 25 years in the atmosphere of Atlanta is quite a feat," says the Center's Executive Director, Vince Anthony. He added, "Atlanta isn't quite as enlightened as some other cities."

ABOVE: Bhima hails from India and is on display in the special exhibit, *Puppetry In Focus*. Photo by Bradford Clark. RIGHT: Front of the Center. Photo by Ross Henderson.



By Kevin Madigan • Photography courtesy of The Center for Puppetry Arts



FROM TOP, LEFT TO RIGHT: Male Dancer with Jeweled Costume; traditional Burmese marionette, c.1915. On display in the permanent museum, *PUPPETS: The Power of Wonder*. Photo by Richard Termine. *The Magic Flute* by the Salzburg Marionette Theatre. Photo courtesy of Salzburg Marionette Theatre. Ot and Emma from *SPACE* by Associate Artistic Director Jon Ludwig. Photo by David Zeiger. Wayland Flowers' Madame is on display in the permanent museum, *PUPPETS: The Power of Wonder*. Photo by Richard Termine. Jot; made by Janie Geiser for Jottay Theatre; U.S. c.1981. On display in the permanent museum, *PUPPETS: The Power of Wonder*. Photo by Richard Termine. *Rumpelstiltskin* by Associate Producer Bobby Box. Photo by Kathryn Kolb. *The Velveteen Rabbit*. Photo by David Zeiger. *Brer Rabbit & Friends* by Associate Artistic Director Jon Ludwig. Photo by Joe Boris.

In addition to family-oriented shows, the Center goes out of its way to present works that go beyond the bounds of what is normally expected from puppetry. The programming comprises edgy, experimental fare under the umbrella of the New Directions Series, which is strictly for adults and pushes the limits of theatrical expression. "A lot of people don't know the depth and scope of the programming here that makes us so unique," says Anthony. "The obvious misconception is that puppetry is just for little kids, which is not true."

Unique it certainly is, being the largest organization of its kind in the country and serving as the U.S. headquarters for the Union Internationale de la Marionnette, the oldest such entity in existence. Anthony, a Floridian, initially launched the venture as a small touring group, called the Vagabond Marionettes, in the late 1960s, then settled in Atlanta after a period of apprenticeship in New York. He says the progress of the Center over its first quarter-century has far exceeded his goals. "It's done more than I expected it to, in terms of reaching greater audiences," he says.

During this time, the Center has championed the cause of puppetry, hosting numerous festivals and conferences, and has received awards, recognition and grants from the eminent Kresge and Ford foundations, among others. It also was picked to participate in the four-year-long Olympic Arts program.

A recent evening with the adult-oriented XPT (Xperimental Puppetry Theater) division began with an animated version of the Hulk pitching for funds, followed by an introduction from a diminutive master of ceremonies named Hoots McGroots, complete with a Scottish brogue, a tiny acoustic guitar and delusions of grandeur. Then there was a piece on Helen of Troy entitled *Helen, WMD* (Woman of Mass Destruction), a bizarre and graphic treatment of *Gilgamesh* and a bit of Dadaist existentialism thrown in for good measure. "The whole Roman philosophy of theater is transport," says Associate Producer Bobby Box. "You're in

one place and theater transports you to another. Even the most jaded audience member—if you're halfway good—will go there with you." Box says that the whole idea of XPT "is to re-define puppetry, to re-define ourselves as artists, to go out to the edge."

Evolutions, another work-in-progress forum for adults, started in the Center's lobby with an eerie piece called *Swarm*, complete with other-worldly singing and large, suspended insects in motion. Once inside the theater, skits range from the baffling to the absurd. One of them, written by puppeteer Reay Kaplan, delves into the macabre with a torrid tale of love gone wrong, jealousy, bloody murder and ghostly revenge, involving a family of rednecks. There is a skit extolling the charms of wrestling and another called the *Tiki Waffle Hut*, which involves Head Puppeteer Lorna Howley wearing a revolving tent, out of which she makes proclamations like "I'm blind as a bat / With just enough fat!"

But even their "traditional" shows like *Beauty and the Beast* and the *Heidi Chronicles* come with only a tenuous adherence to the original story line. Infused with extraneous material and rampant wizardry, they blaze a multitude of trails. The

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incongruous production of *Beauty* features Mr. Big, a giant cigar-chomping wise guy with terrible teeth, and a sassy Mama, who demonstrates the virtues of vigorous aerobic exercise. There are non-puppet players as well—nervous violins, dancing furniture, talking books and intransigent mud-packs. Narration is provided by an affable cat and a couple of mice. A television set in the corner adds a touch of satire to the proceedings with regular updates from *Over-Reaction News*. Children in the audience tend to sit in quiet fascination while some of the more obscure references—to Euripides, for instance, or Bette Davis—sail over their heads.

Regular guests at the Center include the famous Salzburg Marionettes from Austria. Not afraid to tackle opera, they offer a take-off on Rossini's *The Barber of Seville*—in Italian, of course.

Both Howley and Box were lured into the alternate world of puppetry more by accident than by design, and were enticed into making a career of it by the seemingly limitless possibilities of the craft. Howley, who, like many of the principals here, came from an acting background, says: "In regular theater, you play roles according to your gender, age and type. And that's it. But here you can be anything." As an example, Howley points

to hirsute puppeteer Spencer Stephens, who plays the funky and very feminine Mama character in *Beauty*.

The best part of working here, for Box, is the process of discovery. "Because I write and direct shows," he says, "I find things in the puppet universe, use things in the puppet vocabulary, to develop a thought or achieve a goal."

According to Box, the element of surprise is what makes the experience appealing to both adults and children: "There are times when people come in and they're thoroughly amazed, not just (at) the shows, but the museum, the education. They get swept up in it . . . I hear the kids or the parents in the hallway ooing and aahhing!"

Adults who attend the children's shows are often taken aback at how much they get into it, explains puppeteer Julie Dansby. "They're used to enduring it, rather than enjoying it," she says.

There is plenty to enjoy in the Center's museum, which comes to life with an array of puppets and marionettes from all corners of the globe. European, Asian and African countries are represented, with beautiful and intricate examples of each culture's artisans. A section is devoted solely to the truculent Punch and Judy, who originated in fifteenth-century England and have spread to many countries. And who can forget Madame, that old dame with the nose and the attitude? She's here, and so are a couple of porcine characters from the *Muppet Show*.

In this museum, it's permissible to touch the exhibits. Visitors can bond with all manner of strange beings and make parts of the exhibit come to life with a variety of gadgets and pulleys. Or they can ponder the spiritual side of puppetry, or the sacred and profane aspects. Then there's the startling sight of Pinocchio's feet and legs jutting through the ceiling, looking like he's in a terrible hurry to escape from something—perhaps the ominous Trash Can Phoenix, which, at regular intervals, rises to life in all its disturbing and splendid glory.

Participation is endemic in this puppet palace. Enthusiasts can learn how to make a puppet of their own in one of the Center's workshops or can sign up for classes ranging from *Expressive Puppetry for Healthcare Professionals* to *Secrets of the Puppet Shop Revealed*. XPT audiences are invited to a "talk back" following each performance, at which the writers and performers invite critiques and discussions of their pieces. This helps the artists develop their creations and involves the audience in the creative process.

"Playing with puppets is a serious matter," puppet historian John Bell wrote. "A play with transcendence, a play with the basic forces of life and death. This makes it mysterious . . . and fun." **The Center for Puppetry Arts, 1404 Spring Street Atlanta, GA 30309, 404-873-3391, www.puppet.org** Kevin Madigan has written for Creative Loafing, Atlanta Business Chronicle, MTV Online and The Rave. He is also a translator and teacher, and lives in Atlanta.